



**QUEEN'S
UNIVERSITY
BELFAST**

The Search for Informal Conflict Management: The Case of Intel

Roche, W. K., Gormley, T., Currie, D., & Teague, P. (2015). *The Search for Informal Conflict Management: The Case of Intel*. Labour Relations Commission.

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:

[Link to publication record in Queen's University Belfast Research Portal](#)

Publisher rights

Copyright Labour Relations Commission 2015

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Queen's University Belfast Research Portal is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The Research Portal is Queen's institutional repository that provides access to Queen's research output. Every effort has been made to ensure that content in the Research Portal does not infringe any person's rights, or applicable UK laws. If you discover content in the Research Portal that you believe breaches copyright or violates any law, please contact openaccess@qub.ac.uk.



Innovations in Conflict Management

Research Papers

Research Paper 8

**The Search for Informal Conflict Management: The
Case of Intel**

**Paul Teague,
Queen's University Belfast**

**William K. Roche,
University College Dublin**

**Dr Tom Gormley,
University College Dublin**

**Dr Denise Currie,
Queen's University Belfast**

January 2015

Introduction

Unionized and non-unionized firms are commonly seen as having contrasting conflict management systems. Typically, unionized organisations use collective industrial relations processes not only to determine pay and working conditions, but also to address workplace problems. Although systems of collective representation can exist in non-unionized firms, normally there is greater emphasis on managing the employment relationship, including workplace conflict, on an individual basis. The differences between collective and individual forms of workplace conflict management are pretty significant and should not be underestimated. At the same time, conflict management procedures in unionized and non-unionized firms may not be as distinctive as sometimes portrayed. For example, both are likely to use some form of step-wise formalised disciplinary and grievance procedures, which involves unresolved problems travelling up different organizational tiers before a final outcome is realized. There is even an argument that non-unionized firms are leading the adoption of innovative conflict management systems that provide a menu of alternative procedures for the resolution of workplace problems, which frequently would not be found in unionized firms.

The truth is that arguments about the character of conflict management in non-unionized firms are frequently made in the absence of convincing evidence. There is a dearth of good case-study material setting out how workplace problems are addressed in non-unionized firms. The purpose of this case study is to help address this shortcoming by examining how workplace conflict is managed at an Irish subsidiary of Intel, the leading high-tech global company. In particular, the paper explores efforts that are being made to revise conflict management processes and procedures in response to identified changes in the organization's external and internal environment. The paper is organized as follows. Section one sets out the conflict management framework known as the 'Employee Relations Specialists Model' that was established in the subsidiary in the late nineties. The next section explains why this original approach was significantly revised in 2007, leading to the adoption of a new 'Dual Focus Model' (post-2007). The following section discusses current thinking inside Intel Ireland to revise further its approach to conflict management. The conclusions tease out the implications of the arguments developed in the paper.

The company cooperated with the study and gave a detailed overview of how its approach to managing conflict has ebbed and flowed over the years. Interviews were conducted with a senior executive at Intel (Ireland) who has a long tenure with the company and thus able to share a wealth of experience and knowledge about how each of the models evolved. An interview was also conducted with a HR generalist whose role focuses mostly on Employee Relations. They were able to give a detailed account of the current HR model for handling workplace problems and share information about possible future developments. An operational line manager, who has extensive experience within the company, was also interviewed. It was not possible to discuss the evolution of the models with many others as the personnel involved in such matters have changed significantly over the years.

The Employee Relations Specialists Model

Intel is a sophisticated, high-tech global company. It seeks to develop a distinctive organizational identity, part of which is not to recognize trade unions. Across the planet, Intel subsidiaries are non-unionized and Intel Ireland is no exception. When the company first invested in Ireland it declined to sign a recognition agreement with a trade union, a fairly standard practice for incoming multinationals to do at the time, in favour of following its standard non-union HRM model in the subsidiary. But this model did not turn out to be fully successful. In particular, the subsidiary was finding it hard to retain staff. These retention problems were compounded by employees finding it difficult to cope with the challenges of continual change caused by the factory ‘morphing from product to product’ (Senior Executive). It was felt that more needed to be done to allow employees to voice their concerns more effectively.

At the time it was felt that they needed to do something with the model because employees were saying that they didn’t have a voice, they weren’t being heard, there weren’t avenues for resolution. It was felt at the time that we needed to do something to manage this because we were kind of afraid that if employees didn’t have a voice internal then that they would go external and as you know multinationals, American multinationals, want to deal with employees directly. (Senior Executive)

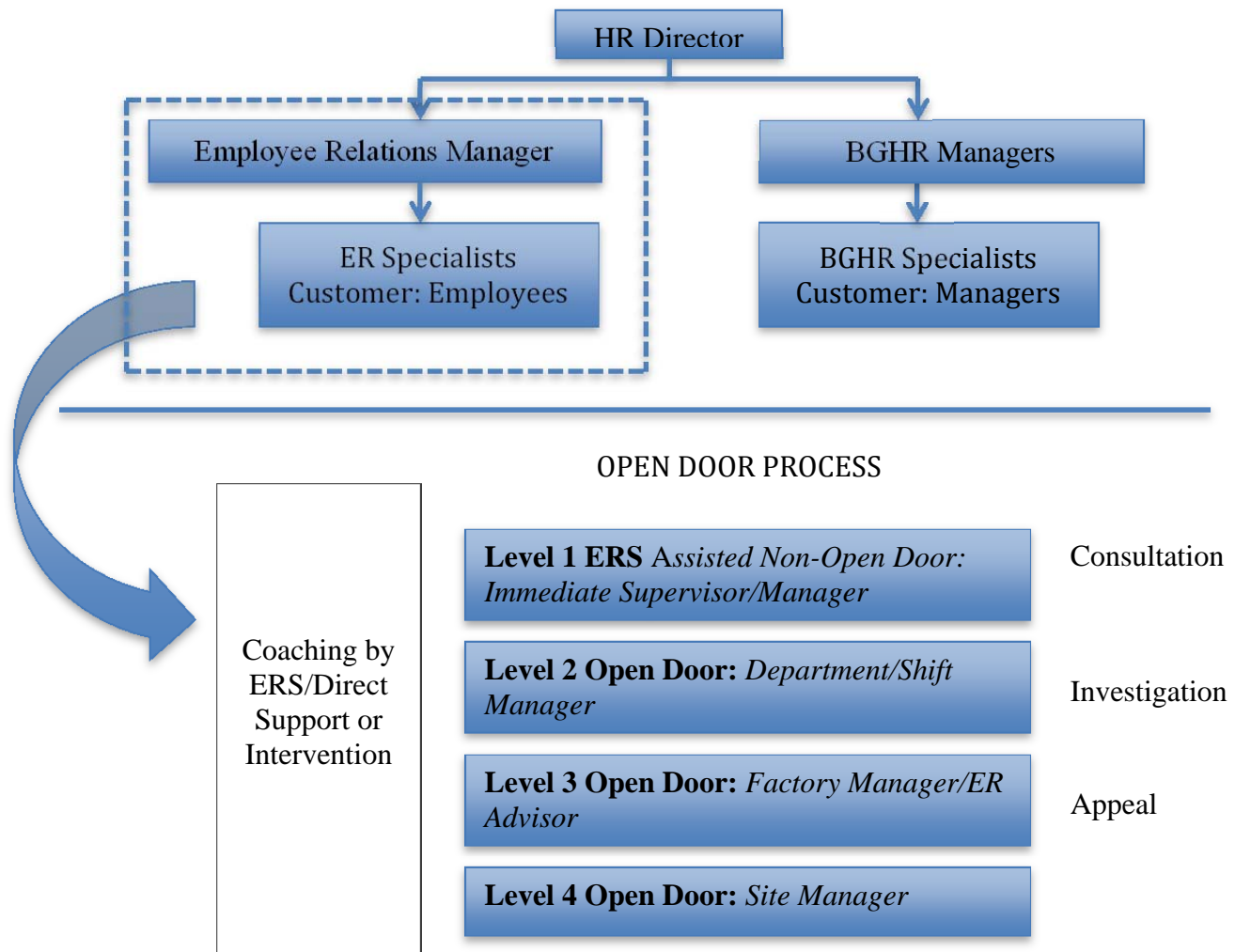
In response to these problems, HR at the subsidiary was tasked with making significant improvements to the employee relations climate. After considerable deliberation, the HR team proposed material changes to the HR model operating in the subsidiary. These were seen as ‘an Irish solution to what was perceived to be an Irish problem’ and would have the effect of Intel Ireland adopting a HR approach that was highly distinctive.

The core change proposed by the HR team was to amend the organization’s open-door policy by creating the new function of employment relations specialists. Intel requires all subsidiaries to operate an open door policy which allows employees to raise any work-related concern to their manager and/or subsequent levels of management until they get a resolution. The design of the policy is more or less the same in different subsidiaries: if employees have a problem then they are expected to first raise the matter with their immediate line manager; if the problem cannot be resolved at this level, then it automatically escalates to the department or shift manager; if a resolution still proves elusive, the problem is then sent to the factory manager or Employee Relations Advisor (who is regarded as being an independent internal investigator); finally the site manager gets involved if the problem continues to be unresolved.

While the open door policy has different problem-solving tiers, the strong expectation is that line managers should be able to prevent or resolve the overwhelming majority of employee problems. Line managers are expected to be able to head off problems by providing guidance and information on a range of issues related to the employee’s job, training, development, company policies and benefits, and so on. They are also expected to be able to address concerns or complaints in a fair, open and prompt manner. Indicators used by the company to determine whether or not the open door process was working well are: 1) when employees are aware of and using the open door to raise workplace issues; 2) when issues are resolved at the lowest possible level – promoting positive supervisor–employee relations; 3) when managers know and meet their obligation to resolve employee issues properly and promptly; 4) when issues are resolved internally; and 5) when measures are taken to understand and address underlying issues, promoting continuous improvement in people practices, and increasing employee morale and satisfaction within the company.

As Intel Ireland was experiencing a number of employee relations problems, it was evident that its open door policy was falling short when assessed against some of these performance indicators. As a result, the HRM team in the subsidiary proposed to redesign the policy so that employment relations matters could be handled more effectively. In particular, it proposed that the HR department be divided into two discrete units, a Business and Generalist HR (BGHR) team and an Employee Relations Specialist (ERS) team. On the one hand, the BGHR team would be responsible for coaching and advising business managers to ensure both legal compliance and best practice in a range of people management issues. On the other hand, the ERS team would provide confidential coaching, advice, counsel and support to employees on any work-related concerns. The proposed changes did not alter the procedures used in the open door process to address problems, but it was envisaged that the ERS would provide support and guidance, but not advocacy, to employees involved in a case going through the process (See Figure 1 outlining the Employment Relations Specialists model and open door process).

Figure 1: Employee Relations Specialists Model and Open Door Process



The changes proposed by the HRM team were adopted and a team of Employment Relations Specialists created. Apart from helping employees to self-represent their cases in the open door procedures, this team also had responsibility for providing business managers with data on issues such as attendance, management training and so on. The ERS team also developed a database of general enquiries they received from employees. They scripted answers to these enquiries and even made proposals to change existing policies on the back of dealing with problems. Originally called the 'Employee Information Support Centre', this service has mutated into a large shared service centre, which is based in Poland, covering Intel subsidiaries in 47 countries. The ERS team first devised the service to allow employees to source information and have their queries answered before engaging in the open door policy. The data accumulated by the team was used to monitor the type of issues being raised by employees and to assess whether employee relations interventions needed fine-tuning. For example, when first set up the ERS team received a host of queries and complaints relating to the subsidiary's attendance policy, which prompted a major rewrite of the policy to make it clearer and less ambiguous.

One of the spectacular successes we had in the very early stages was, there was a huge number of issues relating to attendance. If memory serves me right it was just that our policies were not very well structured and were hard for people to comprehend and hard for managers to comprehend and employees were feeling that they weren't either getting their fair share or that it wasn't being managed properly or appropriately. So in the first 12 months, 15 months, we identified this significant issue and we put a task force in place, talked about examples, and we went from having attendance issues up there with performance management issues to where attendance dropped off the radar; there was just a handful.

(Senior Executive)

The employee information support centre was seen as an important HR innovation even though significant investment was required to build sophisticated tracking mechanisms and data management tools to extrapolate trends in employee queries. At the same time, it was recognised that the employee information support centre was not an appropriate avenue for resolving more complicated matters. As a result, the

responsibility of the ERS team to support employees should they decide to raise an issue through the open door policy remained undiminished.

And then your other role was of course supporting the employee through the open door process where it could be very adversarial, where an employee came to you and said look I want to use the open door, I want to raise an issue and it could be an issue with their manager and you're helping that employee structure their complaint and you're giving that the best shot that you can because you are their support. (Senior Executive)

A number of the design features of the ERS team were seen as enabling the creation of a neutral and impartial setting for the resolution of disputes and to ensuring that workplace justice prevailed in the organization. First of all, setting up the ERS team as an autonomous unit separate from other parts of the HR function and not answerable to any other business managers was seen as critical for the service gaining legitimacy with employees:

They were really independent. When I say independent they had their own boss who managed that function, but they weren't beholden to any other business manager and they were able to hold the confidentiality of the conversations with the employees and get the support of the business in doing that. (Senior Executive)

This principle of an independent ERS team, which was not replicated anywhere else within Intel, sent a strong signal to employees that they could seek advice and support with the knowledge that the ERS advisor would act solely in their interests.

Secondly, allowing the ERS team to keep the information and details of employees confidential was not only seen as assisting the resolution of problems, but also providing employees with the assurance that they could seek advice and counsel knowing that trust would not be breached. Providing the ERS with the organizational space to maintain confidentiality was unlike anything that existed elsewhere in Intel and in other organizations for that matter:

You bring an employee to the table and you're talking to them in confidence and at the end of the day the only way the manager is

actually going to know is if there's an escalation. So very often the issue is resolved, the employee goes back and the manager may or may not notice a change but hasn't an idea that the conversation was had.

Some of my peers in other jurisdictions couldn't get their head around this piece of it where I would meet with an employee in total confidence and talk to the employee about anything in total confidence, that you had this total lockdown. Now like every HR professional meets with employees in confidence to work their issues but at some stage somebody in the organisation finds out who that employee is because you're talking to a manager about getting a resolution to it but often we would go back and would say we have an issue identified in an area but we wouldn't identify who gave us the information. While other people in other HR functions would argue well it's not very different to what we do, it really was. It was very different, how we sold the service to employees and how we put it out there and we marketed it was very different to what you would get in most other organisations. (Senior Executive)

While embedding the principles of independence and confidentiality within the work of the ERS team encouraged employees to regard it as neutral and impartial, a concerted marketing campaign ensured that the service was visible and accessible to them. When it was first set up, the ERS team promoted the new service very heavily by distributing thousands of brochures as well as participating in many staff meetings. It found that the service was taken up by lower level employees very quickly.

Initially the lower grade employees would have utilised the service very quickly because they wouldn't have had any fear and they would see it as support to them and when they went in and spoke to them; this was great for them because they had somebody that was willing to listen to, to hear them, to give them advice and to say well it might be something that you need to escalate or no you need to go back and you need to get it sorted. (Senior Executive)

Lastly, uptake and trust in the service was strengthened by the ERS team pursuing activities that improved the employee relations climate of the company. For example, amongst other things, the ERS team proactively dealt with workplace stress by working with the training department on the introduction of initiatives to help employees manage stress.

Although employees bought into the new service relatively quickly, the same was not true for managers. From the outset, managers were sceptical of the initiative, viewing it almost as a threat to the way they functioned. As a result, the ERS team had to focus a lot of their attention on winning over managers to the service.

One of the things we did extremely successfully in the early stages of the evolution of the model was getting employees to trust us. I used to stand up in front of employees regularly at business update meetings, monthly update meetings and just bringing in information, including the information; like one of the biggest battles I had in the early stages was convincing people that it was ok to put information up in front of employees about the number of cases that were there about the function that we were doing and that was a significant battle because there were some managers that really did not want that. (Senior Executive)

The Senior Executive goes on further to explain that:

The managers had I would say a fully understandable fear. As a manager you don't want to show weakness and you don't want to show that you have to go and get somebody in to help you sort out a problem in your area and particularly if there's an overarching problem that was identified through maybe three or four employees coming with a particular problem with a particular manager who maybe for whatever reason wasn't doing well with the employees that they were managing and that surfaced where part of the deal with the employee was that we would need to go in and do an ER intervention in the area. That was problematic because that would have been resisted by, not everybody, but certainly some managers would have been very resistant to it and that was where you rolled

up your sleeves and put on your knuckledusters and got in there and fought, fought the hard fight.

Gradually, however, managers began to buy into the service, not least because they found very useful the data being collected by the ERS team on employee relations trends. After a time, they even started using the service themselves.

We got out there in front of people, as we went into the staff, as we brought in our data, as we showed people the benefit of what it was that we were doing then you would get managers coming to you and often very much, very sheepish in some regards because they would have been guys that would have beaten the crap out of you there back some months ago and they're coming to you and saying can I have a confidential conversation and you would spend 10 minutes going through the confidentiality of the process; like you would have to convince them that it was ok to come to you to talk to you.

(Senior Executive)

A number of additional factors also contributed to the early success of what was effectively a new HR model. People recruited to the ERS team had a range of skills and backgrounds that complemented each other and they worked to advance the objectives of the new model. For example, some of the ERS team had backgrounds in HR while others were brought on board from the manufacturing side of the business. Having people with a non-HR background was considered an asset because they 'knew the factory, language, knew the gig, knew the vibe and would be able to dance the dance with the people who worked in the factory' (Senior Executive). People with these skills on the team helped the service gain the trust of factory employees. They also helped the other ER specialists with little to no manufacturing experience understand more fully the nature of the jobs carried out by factory employees:

In a lot of cases the factory guyswould tend to come to me first so I had to put a mechanism in place that just ensured that they were going other places; that they weren't just coming to me because they knew me and they knew that I knew the factory and all the rest of it. So I made it comfortable for them to go and talk to the other ERs and for the other ERs to be comfortable in talking to them. We

spoke about that quite a bit and we were able to break down those barriers. It was an extremely well-functioning team as it evolved.
(Senior Executive)

The ERS team was further strengthened by all of them acquiring counselling skills, including a diploma in organisational counselling. This involved ‘training in mediation, listening, how to intervene in certain situations, how to keep your cool’. This proved to be an innovative aspect of the service and was welcomed by the team as it allowed them to better assist employees, many of whom were raising personal matters.

As the new HR model became more established, the ERS Team functioned very effectively, with contrasting skills in the team deployed to address problems for which they were most suited. Each individual on the ERS team had their own style of approaching a conflict situation, and roles were delegated given the different scenarios that arose. For example, the Senior Executive explained that when he was an ER specialist he would have had his own style and would ‘drive [a conflict situation] in a different way compared to some of the other employee relations specialists who were from a pure HR background’. Thus, the measure of success for the ERS team was not about the number of employees that were dealt with, but that issues were addressed and resolved in the most appropriate manner. However, not everything was plain sailing. The relationship between the ERS and BGHR teams, the two streams of the HR function at the subsidiary, could be challenging at times. Formally, the BGHR team was responsible for advising the business managers, but a member of the ERS team could also deal directly with a business manager should they be involved in a workplace problem. Some members of the BGHR team disliked this arrangement, viewing it as an unwarranted encroachment into their sphere of responsibility. At times the BGHR team took exception when the ERS team intervened, which caused tensions between the two sides of the HR function. This tension was not anticipated in advance. Other unexpected outcomes also arose from the functioning of the new HR model for resolving disputes. These are examined in the next section.

Outcomes of Employee Relations Specialists Model: The Need for Change

The ERS model secured some very positive outcomes for Intel Ireland when first introduced. For example, over the period from 1999 – 2006, 86 per cent of the 5,611 issues raised through the open door process were resolved satisfactorily at an early stage due to the involvement of the ERS team. Of the 14 per cent which went to the next level, 45 per cent were resolved in favour of employees. The majority of employees involved in these cases continued to work successfully at Intel. Thus, the Employee Relations Specialists model achieved many of its core objectives as employees were aware of and using the Open Door to raise workplace issues. Moreover, the ERS team was doing its job effectively as the majority of issues raised were resolved: it was an extreme rarity for an issue not to be resolved internally and instead enter the State's dispute resolution machinery. Furthermore, the data collected by the ERS team on employee relations issues resulted in Intel Ireland being more sophisticated than any of the company's other subsidiaries in understanding and addressing employee problems.

Being seen as impartial and neutral was the core reason behind the achievements of the Employee Relations Specialists model. The ERS team operated as an independent entity within the organization, safeguarding the confidentiality of employees when necessary. It ensured that due process was followed when cases entered the Open Door Policy: issues brought by employees were treated in a timely, fair and consistent manner. The ERS team effectively acted as the 'employee champion' inside the subsidiary.

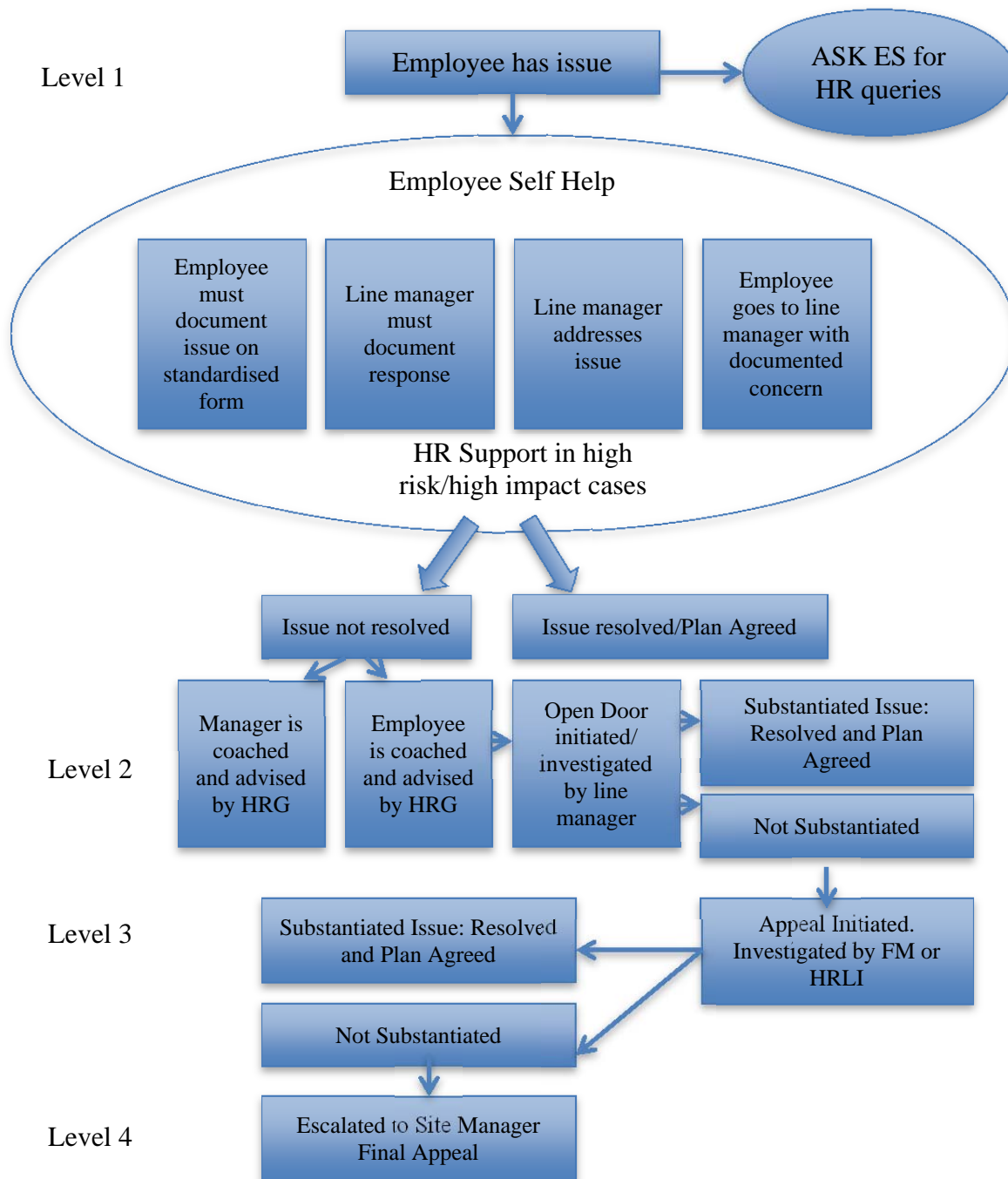
Although the ERS model had many positive attributes, it was seen as having one major weakness in that it failed to ensure that line managers met their responsibility to resolve employee issues properly and promptly. One of the reasons why the ERS team handled such a high number of cases in its high formative years was because many employees side-stepped their line managers and engaged directly with an Employee Relations Specialist. Frequently, line managers even told employees to go to the ER specialists instead of dealing with the issues themselves. In effect, the model was a casualty of its own success in that line managers began to abdicate their responsibility for resolving issues.

A number of additional problems started to emerge. First, concerns were raised about the ERS team spending too much time counselling personal problems instead of focusing on work-related matters. Secondly, the model was very resource intensive to operate, with its data management role being particularly costly. The expense of running the ERS team became an issue when the economic downturn arrived in 2008. This obliged many departments, including HR, to reduce headcount. Lastly, relationships between the BGHR and ERS teams had become increasingly polarized, with an adverse impact on the effectiveness of the Employee Relations Specialists model. If any of these problems had emerged on their own the consequences would have been trivial. But with the problems emerging at the same time, senior management felt compelled to review, root-and-branch, the ERS model. The review resulted in the subsidiary abandoning the ERS model. Although the review argued that employees would still receive extensive support and guidance when they raised problems, it also stressed that a more resource-effective model was needed to address employee problems and that the employee/line-manager relationship should be at the centre of any new arrangement. The new approach devised to manage employee problems is known as the Dual Focus model.

The Dual Focus Model

The creation of the Dual Focus model resulted in the separate ERS and BGHR teams being integrated to form a single HR Generalist team. The new integrated team had the dual role of providing HR support to business managers and at the same time facilitating and supporting employees using the open door process. In practice this meant that, when a grievance entered the open door process, separate HR generalists would support the employee/s and manager/s involved. Furthermore, HR generalists could be involved in the open door process supporting an employee on one matter and a manager on another: they were not tied to supporting either employees or managers. This new arrangement was seen as having the merit of making HR generalists sensitive to the different needs of employees and managers that arise in problem-solving situations. Furthermore, it was argued that allowing the HR team perform varying roles would result in it providing a more agile and flexible support system to the business. The new process is outlined in Figure 2 overleaf.

Figure 2: Dual Focus Model and Open Door Process



FM= Factory Manager
HRLI=Human Resource Legal Investigator

Underpinning the new Dual Focus model was a number of guiding principles. First, values of self-help and self-representation were re-emphasized. Employees were encouraged to address issues themselves in the first instance by engaging with the employee relations support centre (or ASK ES, as it became known). If their problem

remained unresolved, then it was expected that they would raise the matter with their line manager. Although line management engagement in the resolution of workplace conflict was always a key principle of the open door process, it had atrophied under the ERS regime. Thus, a second guiding principle of the new model was re-asserting the importance of the employee–line manager relationship. The new HR team, whose headcount had been considerably reduced, normally do not get involved with Level 1 issues in the open door procedure. Instead, line managers are expected to address these issues. To help line managers perform this role successfully, the HR team have developed extensive conflict management training and support for them.

I suppose there's more training over the last couple of years; it's all paying off now and there's more resources at the manager's fingertips, at their own laptops where they can source more information. (HR Generalist)

Under the Dual Focus model, line management engagement is now considered a critical feature of conflict management at Intel Ireland, as the Senior Executive contends:

In my opinion they are absolutely crucial and their skill, expertise, willingness to do and ability to do it is just absolutely to the front. It can't be like it used to be where you're reliant on a support organisation to come in and fix it. That's not sustainable from a cost perspective any more. (Senior Executive)

A third guiding principle of the Dual Focus model is that HR should not provide a counselling service. Under the ERS regime considerable effort was made to help employees resolve personal as well as professional issues. But this activity was considered too burdensome. As a result, under the new approach HR generalists simply refer employees to services such as the Employee Assistance Programme operated by the Occupational Health Department for counselling support. A further change introduced by the new model was the creation of the role of HR Legal Investigator. This role was similar to the previous Employee Relations Advisor role that was responsible for investigating disputes when they escalated to the appeal stage at Level 3 of the open door process. The role was created to give expression to the fourth principle of the new Dual Focus model, which was that only a specialist (the

Senior Executive) should carry out investigations that involved legal risk (e.g. harassment or bullying claims) – other managers would be permitted to continue doing less risky open door investigations. The person appointed to the HR Legal Investigator role was highly experienced. A strong proactive partnership between the HR legal Investigator and the HR Generalist team has developed, which ensures that appropriate interventions are made when risks are identified. The whole thrust of the new model is to resolve disputes in a timely manner and to avoid unnecessary escalation to higher levels for resolution.

The Dynamics of the Dual Focus Model

The Dual Focus model for handling disputes was primarily designed to support and facilitate both employees and managers when going through the open door process. However the model is not designed for the HR team to act as advocates for either side, but to help each side self-represent their case and to ensure that the open door process is implemented in a fair, neutral and impartial manner. The HR Generalist interviewed explained his view on the model and how it works:

I suppose how it works is it's openly known that's the model and when you're meeting with an employee you have to dispel whatever allegiance you may have to managers you may know or like or have worked with in the past; you work I suppose with their genuine interest in mind and you're not necessarily advocating their position but you're an advocate of fairness. If advocating a position is contrary to what they want but it's the fair and right thing to do, your job has got to help them understand why their manager might be saying that. So you're not the employee's advocate, you're not the manager's advocate although I know we're all wearing Intel badges and we are all agents of the company but you're, I like to say, we're advocates of the sense of fairness on the site. You display that to managers and employees, whoever they are, young, old, male, female, manager, employee; they see that and they feel that you're here genuinely trying to resolve an issue as opposed to, regardless of the sentiment, articulate their position. (HR Generalist)

However, when putting the model into practice it could be argued that the HR Generalists team adopt many other roles in the management of conflict. First, they could be labelled what Walker & Hamilton (2011) call 'Compliance Managers' who concentrate mostly on advising on the administrative and legal aspects of a dispute. The HR Generalists team were responsible for ensuring the integrity of the open door process and that it is utilised in the manner for which it was designed. To this end, the team monitors and tracks the development of grievances to ensure they are dealt with effectively. Tracking grievances involves capturing information on detailed spread sheets and the HR team regularly reviewing the current issues going through the open door process. These activities seek to ensure that managers involved in an open door process are responding without delay to an employee's grievance. The HR Generalist explained how this worked:

We would track at what level is the grievance, who has raised it, what is the grievance, who have they raised it to and where are we with it. And why isn't it closed yet? Is it now over the timeline, we move from open and green to late and red. And we'd be telling whoever the person is who supports that manager will you ever get him/her to respond to that because we'll have to intervene and escalate this to his manager. This is now impacting the integrity of the process, right...So by next week's meeting will you make sure he's submitted or can you make sure the manager has responded to that document, you just keep on top of it. Because we didn't do this maybe two, three years ago and we were just I suppose loosely keeping an eye on them and then you'd find out one manager hasn't responded in six weeks and you scramble to close it. So by doing this we kind of diligently make sure nothing slips. (HR Generalist)

Thus by monitoring and tracking the progression of grievances raised through the open door process, the HR team ensures that managers and employees comply with the procedures associated with the process. The importance of complying with the set procedures was further explained:

So if you have a factory manager who, after three or four weeks, still hadn't responded to the Level 2, as we call it, appeal that was

sent to them, it's a hard job to make sure they close that, not because we want to protect them or save ourselves time or whatever, but because the guy who has raised the grievance now is increasingly thinking, this whole open door process doesn't work, I've raised a grievance with that guy three weeks ago, I've had no response, I'm going to my local solicitor, I'm going to [the site manager] so it's in our interest to help him close that to maintain the integrity of the process so we don't ever have employees walking around saying don't use that whole open door; don't go to HR, it doesn't work, they never respond, I'm going to a solicitor. (HR Generalist)

Ensuring compliance with the process reduces the risk that an issue will escalate unnecessarily. However, there are issues, which by their very nature, pose greater risks to the company's reputation and internal operations and thus require speedy escalation to a higher level. For example, if there was a claim of bullying or harassment, the responsibility of the HR team is to notify immediately the HR Legal Investigator. Thus, a second role adopted by the HR team in the implementation of the Dual Focus model is that of 'risk manager'.

Where someone would raise a grievance about their manager and how their manager is treating them, bullying claims. Now they would be the kind of cases that would go straight to [HR Legal Investigator]. You wouldn't ask a manager how to deal with that because he's not equipped, he hasn't got the time resource to deal with the bullying claim. Bullying or any other case that has a risk of going messy goes straight to [HR Legal Investigator]; that's his bread and butter. He's the best man in the land for dealing with those kind of complaints. (HR Generalist)

The HR Generalist goes on to explain how such risks are monitored:

Is it a HR legal, high risk, high impact case yes or no. And we have a definition as to what constitutes a high risk, high impact case. It's a case which requires or may require a HR legal. The HR Legal

Investigator is involved in it or he will be involved in it. Is it likely to be escalated beyond a department manager. (HR Generalist)

A third role attributed to the HR team when handling conflict is ‘conflict brokers’. Given the dual focus of their role in the open door process, the HR team engage with the view of employees and managers across a range of different issues. This engagement enhances the capabilities of the HR team to devise solutions to problems. As the HR Generalist explained, ‘we kind of grease the wheel in the background’. Thus given how the Dual Focus model operates in practice, it is argued that solutions can be achieved given the greater scope of information and perspective attained by the HR team.

Outcomes of the Dual Focus Model

Intel Ireland’s HR team considers the Dual Focus model as being fit for purpose and thus have no immediate plans to review or change its core operating principles. The fact that 94 per cent of issues in 2013 were resolved at Level 1 through the line management consultation stage is held up as evidence that the model is working efficiently. Moreover, the number of issues addressed by line managers is seen as proof that employees are still willing to raise grievances through the open door process and have faith that their problems will be handled fairly by the process. Currently, it is performance management issues that escalate most frequently and other more serious issues involving bullying or harassment are a rarity.

Because I suppose five, 10 years ago everything, anything would have been raised as a grievance, but the managers now are getting so slick at having to deal with these....You rarely hear of complaints about management behaviours or harassment or, you never hear of sexual harassment, all those sort of things, that is just not in our DNA here. What you will see people appealing would be either when they get a warning or a below expectations rating [in their performance appraisal] because they’re now more aware of the consequences of this. But still there’s overall less grievances raised now than there would have been five or 10 years ago. (HR Generalist)

It is recognised that line management behaviour can have a huge impact on whether an employee believes they have been treated unfairly in the performance management process and whether they will be motivated to raise a grievance about their performance rating.

It's when you're told you're successful when you think you've been walking on water all year, where you think you're worthy of 'exceed expectations' or a higher pay rise or promotion and the managers say no, no. What you did this year was very good but that's what I expect you to do at your grade and you are successful. The employee then wants to appeal that because they think they have grounds to argue that they were worthy of promotion.

However, it is recognised that to combat the escalation of performance management issues line managers must learn to manage the expectations of their employees throughout the entire year. As a result, the HR team designed appropriate interventions to ensure line managers acquire the appropriate training to manage the performance of their employees.

The people who were managing the lower performers all year are getting better at that, that there's no surprises. If you had spoken to me or someone like me 10 years ago here there would have been surprise at the end of the year when you're told you're beneath your expectations and that would have been common enough now whereas now we really tell the managers if someone is not performing where you expect them to be by March or June or August they should know now not to wait until the end of the year until it comes to the annual review process to tell them and surprise them. (HR Generalist)

Thus, the HR team reports that the Dual Focus model is working effectively, but it also recognises that its success is dependent on line managers working effectively. A concern growing within the HR team is that line managers are finding it increasingly difficult to combine successfully their people management and operational tasks, which could put in jeopardy the functioning of the Dual Focus model.

I think if you had managers in here they would say because of everything that's on my plate we're under pressure. There's an expectation that you hold fortnightly one on ones with all of your people not to mention I'm asked to go off site in the evenings and do my degree to get my level 8 qualification and I'm being sent on seed assignment next June and I've got two tools docking and there's this and there's that and there's the other. So they would say because everything is on their plates now they're under pressure. I think it'd be fair to say if you get any manager in here they'd say they're under pressure. (HR Generalist)

At the same time, line managers appear committed to developing and sustaining positive employee/manager relationships and view addressing grievances through the open door process as part and parcel of this process. The line manager interviewed welcomed the changes made by the Dual Focus model because it was seen as bringing a renewed focus to the employee–manager relationship and empowering line managers to make decisions regarding the issues that employees raised.

It's just that you're empowered a lot more to make a decision but if you made a decision you have to document it and explain your reasons why as a manager. That's how I feel. There's a lot more, go and do it and you resolve it and you, if it gets to the next level so be it, but at least have your documentation and explain the reasons why you've done this, you know. (Operational Line Manager)

Furthermore, it is also evident that the line manager was very conscientious about keeping on top of people management issues even though he faced significant and sustained operational pressures:

Everybody needs to be safe in work and then people are the next biggest thing in here, absolutely. Oh yeah, if I need to take it out and resolve something you do it; we'll get somebody else in to keep an eye on what goes on in the factory, by all means you go off and get that resolved. (Operational Line Manager)

It is an open question whether the Dual Focus model is as neutral and independent as the previous Employee Relations Specialists model. Whereas the organizational independence enjoyed by the Employee Relations Specialists model strongly enhanced its neutrality and impartiality, the Dual Focus model may find it more difficult to exhibit these principles because the HR team are obliged to advise on how business performance can be improved at the same time as advising and supporting employees who raise issues. As it is difficult to align these two HR Generalists' roles, it could be argued the Dual Focus model is less likely to be regarded by employees as genuinely neutral and impartial. How the model works in practice is also influenced greatly by the personal judgement of the HR generalists involved, particularly in how they decide to share information and how they attempt to broker a possible resolution to the dispute between two parties. Thus, questions about the neutrality and impartiality of the model were posed to the interviewee, to which they responded:

Yes it's funny because you could hear this and think well that sounds like this guy is meeting an employee one day, a manager the next and he could be seen as advocating an employee's position one day and a manager's the next and they could say how does that work? He can't be all things to all people and you're invariably going to find yourself with allegiances to managers you either know or like or you work with and that employee may see you one day talking to that manager. So how does that work? I suppose how it works is it's openly known that's the model and when you're meeting with an employee you have to dispel whatever allegiance you may have to managers you may know or like or have worked with in the past; you work I suppose with their genuine interest in mind and you're not necessarily advocating their position but you're an advocate of fairness. (HR Generalist)

The HR Generalist further suggested that employees have trust and confidence in the model and how it operates. The willingness of the great majority of employees to accept an internal resolution to their case and not use the State's dispute resolution machinery was considered a good indicator of their trust in the model. It was also argued that the HR team have made a huge effort to ensure that the model and its processes are applied consistently across the subsidiary, which reduces the scope for

line managers acting in too discretionary a manner. The consistent application of the model is seen as leading to employees trusting the process and its outcomes.

Current and Future Developments

Although the HR team of Intel Ireland reports that the Dual Focus model is fit for purpose, there are a number of other developments that are being implemented, or at least being considered, to improve the management of conflict within the subsidiary. First, the HR team is considering introducing some form of mediation to increase its conflict management options. Mediation has been introduced widely in an Intel subsidiary in Arizona and the HR Generalist mostly responsible for ER matters investigated the feasibility and appropriateness of introducing a variant of this scheme to Ireland. Their review was cool on introducing mediation as a formal option for the resolution of disputes within Intel Ireland. Instead, its suitability was seen as limited to disputes of an inter-personal nature, normally involving a breakdown in relationships between colleagues. Thus, it was seen as a viable option in a case that involved bullying, but only if it were subsequent to a normal investigative process conducted by the HR Legal Investigator. The HR Generalist was firm in his opinion that, should it be introduced, mediation should be a purely internal process involving Intel managers being trained as mediators. The use of any external parties to deliver mediation was stoutly opposed.

Mediation is not going to resolve the issues when telling someone why you weren't promoted. Let the manager tell you why you weren't promoted. But when it's an inter-personal dispute where they're not appreciative of each other's view, that's where we thought mediation could be applied. And then what we've lately come to the realisation is maybe we could marry the two practices: the legal investigator continue to do what he does with these two people who are in dispute or are making allegations of bullying or whatever against the other and he finds what he finds and then we'll apply mediation to try and repair the working relationship. Maybe that's the way we'll do it. (HR Generalist)

Considering the introduction of an additional conflict management process to help those involved in an inter-personal dispute to re-establish a working relationship is

tantamount to admitting that there are gaps in the current way problems and disputes are addressed at the subsidiary:

We'd look back on the cases and we'd say could we have dealt with that another way because the current model is where HRLI (Human Resource Legal Investigator) and I meet Johnny, for example. He has a complaint against Mary, I support Johnny in documenting his complaint. He's told to keep it confidential, don't talk to Mary and then they're kept apart, well verbally; they'll still work together, side by side perhaps and then the HRLI will meet Johnny on his own in a room and then separately he'll meet Mary on her own and they'll be told to keep it all confidential and then he'll do an investigation and then he'll give his outcome to Johnny and the outcome to Mary. And they're both released back into the wild and it's kind of fingers crossed that they just get on with it. And they're both left with a sour taste in their mouth and they never really get to speak and hear each other out. (HR Generalist)

But it was felt that introducing mediation, irrespective of how frequently it would be used, would not be straightforward as senior managers would take some convincing to buy into the idea.

There's a lot of very senior stakeholders who will want to know well, let me know why there's suddenly a need to do this and what are the risks of it not working. So we're finding it hard to get it over the line, to convince people there's a need to do this because it would suggest the current process doesn't work. And we're here 25 years and all I've ever heard from you guys in HR is our process works and it's showcased to IBEC and you know, we know it works so why now suddenly are we doing this new thing called mediation is what you're trying to get over the line with certain people, you know. (HR Generalist)

Thus, the appetite for conflict management innovation beyond fine-tuning recognised procedures is limited among senior managers. Compounding the problem is the assessment by the HR team that significant barriers exist to the effective

implementation of mediation. In its view, it would be difficult enough for internal mediators to gain sufficient trust in their impartiality to be effective. The team envisaged concerns being raised about a mediator who was a business manager and perceived as strongly aligned with the business objectives of the subsidiary. Concerns were also harboured by the team about how and who would make the decision to use mediation in a particular case – would it be an employee, a business manager, the HR Director, the Senior Executive, and could that decision be appealed? There were also anxieties about how to square the mediation imperative of maintaining confidentiality with Intel's requirements to retain and disclose information. For example, the HR Generalist explains:

Let's say we did do a mediation session with two people and there's an apparent agreed resolution and in nine months' time something happens and it all flares up again and this time they probably should go to the HRLI. He can't come to back to me and say can I see your notes from that mediation and what the agreement was. I should be able to say no, you cannot. So there's that kind of challenge. (HR Generalist)

Thus, although mediation is currently being considered as a potential new procedure to assist the resolution of certain types of inter-personal disputes, this innovation has yet to be adopted. If mediation is introduced more formally, it is accepted that a lot of background research would be required to justify such a change 'because at the moment there is no screaming need for mediation to be introduced'.

Another matter currently being deliberated upon is improving data management of employee relations issues. As we have seen, the subsidiary already has a range of data monitoring and tracking systems to keep abreast of employee relations data. These systems are used to make appropriate ER interventions. However, in preparation for major changes planned for the incoming four years, the HR team have developed more sophisticated tracking, monitoring and intervention systems in order to identify and rectify potential issues before the major change upheaval is experienced across the plant.

Thus, the HR team is focused on reviewing whether its problem-solving regime is aligned with unfolding business and operational developments. The collation and

analysis of ER data, along with other people management data, have become a key priority for the HR team so that appropriate interventions can be made to prepare managers for the major change programme that is imminent. The data being collated by the HR team includes indicators for each business group of things such as: years of experience of each manager, number of safety incidents recorded, number of employees visiting occupational health, number of undesired resignations, number of employees on long-term absence, number of reports each manager has, and the number of grievances raised through the open door process. These quantitative data are complemented by further qualitative data, gathered through focus groups called employee sensing sessions and other informal mechanisms, in order to develop a full picture of the people management situation within each business group. On the back of completing these tasks, HR interventions are forged to improve people management in business groups. These interventions may involve up-skilling particular managers on how to deal with grievances, or it may require managers to attend training on managerial style, or to take action to alleviate line management pressure.

Conclusions

During the past decade, considerable change has occurred in the conflict management regime at Intel Ireland. To a large extent, this change has been driven by the search for greater informal conflict management. In the early 2000s, the subsidiary operated a comprehensive and quite institutionalized conflict management system. On paper, this system encouraged both formal and informal conflict management, but in practice it was found that formal procedures were crowding out the informal resolution of problems. In particular, employees were effectively by-passing their line managers and going straight to the open door procedure to have their problems addressed formally. What made matters worse was that line managers began abdicating their responsibility to address problems by simply redirecting employees who raised problems to formal procedures. The substitution of informal conflict management by formalized problem-solving procedures was considered unsatisfactory: not only was the principle of solving issues close to the point of their origin being affronted, but the actual resolution of problems was turning out to be quite costly.

As a result, significant change was made to the conflict management regime to re-assert the primacy of informal conflict management. In practice, this meant placing line managers in the forefront of conflict management efforts. The previous institutionalized conflict management procedures were scaled back, but not abandoned. Importantly, considerable efforts have been made to establish a new complementarity between formal and informal conflict management. The HR team make on-going efforts to provide line managers with the necessary training and support to allow them carry out their problem-solving activities. Formal procedures are quickly brought into play to address problems that are beyond the reach of line managers to resolve. In addition, the HR team continuously monitor the state-of-play with regard to the management of conflict through collecting copious amount of relevant data. Thus, while informal conflict management by line management is very much to the fore, it is nested within a wider formal framework that provides back-up support and assistance.

The transition to a newer informal conflict management regime has been broadly successful. Line managers now resolve the vast bulk of employee problems without having to revert to formal procedures. But the shift to informality has not been costless. Even though the HR team are insistent that they make continuous efforts to ensure that problems are addressed fairly, a question that arises about the radical pruning of formal procedures that occurred concerns whether it may have made the conflict management regime less robust in terms of its neutrality and impartiality. Conflict management appears to be more driven by the needs of the business than those of employees. At the same time, it would be harsh to say that issues of fairness have been squeezed out of conflict management procedures. The HR team give considerable thought to how problems can be solved impartially and fairly.

Because the HR team are broadly content that a workable balance has been achieved between formal and informal conflict management, it is unlikely that any far-reaching innovation will be made to the current conflict management regime. Even the prospect of relatively small-scale change is treated with considerable caution, as shown by the questions that are being raised over whether or not to introduce mediation. Thus, conflict management at Intel is likely to remain unchanged provided that some part of the problem-solving regime does not malfunction. This is unlikely to happen, however. The only cause for concern with the present conflict management

arrangements is that too much may be being asked of line managers. At the same time as line managers are being asked to solve problems effectively and quickly, the pressures on them to deliver even greater operational success mount. Line manager overload or burn out is a spectre that is starting to make the HR team uncomfortable given its adverse consequences for the management of conflict.

References

Walker, B. and Hamilton, R.T. (2011), 'Employment rights disputes: What is the role of HR professionals?', *Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resource Management*, 49(4): 409–424.